

Rome, January 25, 2005
Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul
Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission

To the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission

The Visitor is the one who has the primary responsibility that the Vincentian charism — which is revealed as an experience of the Spirit and transmitted from the Founders to their disciples — be lived, safe-guarded, deepened and constantly developed by the confreres of his province in harmony with the Mystical Body of Christ, in a continuous process of growth (*A Practical Guide for the Visitor*, no. 10).

Dear Brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

This Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, when we celebrate the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, gives us the opportunity to reflect on our identity. Our recent General Assembly, in July 2004, invited us to look at our Vincentian identity today in light of the Constitutions. Throughout this circular, I will refer indirectly to a number of points from the Final Document, but my main objective is to focus on five aspects dealing concretely with our identity and the need to deepen it.

The first point has to do with a commitment I made personally with the young confreres during the General Assembly. It was the desire on my part, as well as on the part of the delegates who were present, to establish a communication network. I would like to present some of the ideas we discussed in a meeting following the dialogue with the young delegates.

Secondly, I would like to talk a little bit about formation, ongoing formation in general, and, in particular, our CIF program.

Thirdly, I want to speak about our Vincentian Family website and how we might be able to improve it as a way of telling our story and helping one another to discover our identity as it is lived out today.

Fourthly, one of the ways of deepening our identity is through unique experiences, surprising experiences, uncommon experiences and seeing how God uses these to help us discern who we are as Vincentians. In this point I want to highlight the project, which is also open to other members of the Vincentian Family, that our

confreres in the Province of China have carried on for a number of years, that of teaching English in the Chinese universities.

Fifthly, I want to touch on the importance not only of coming to discover our identity, but also of sharing that identity with others, passing it on. Here I would like to focus on passing it on to other members of the Vincentian Family, but especially to our younger members in the Vincentian Marian Youth.

I. Network with the younger missionaries

With regard to the first point, I would like to establish a contact network with the younger confreres of the Congregation throughout the world. This is a particular concern of mine, both because of my own personal experience as Coordinator of the Mission in Panama and formator, and later as Visitor of the Province of Central America, and also because of what I heard in the meeting with the young delegates at the General Assembly, that is, the need for deepening our identity, our sense of belonging to the Congregation of the Mission.

In provinces that are considered developing provinces, provinces that are growing, provinces that are relatively young, there is a need for, as we heard on a number of occasions throughout the General Assembly, a greater sense of accompaniment. Many times the formators themselves are very young and, being so, it is sometimes difficult for them to give the accompaniment which a young man needs in his time of formation. This is certainly a responsibility of all confreres, especially the Visitor, as is indicated in our Constitutions and in the *Practical Guide for the Visitor*. We must have a special concern for those in formation and that concern should be extended to all younger confreres, those newly ordained or newly professed missionaries. These, when missioned for the first time, often find themselves lost, alone, even unaccompanied. Hopefully this is not because of a lack of concern on the part of the other confreres of the local communities, but perhaps because of overcommitment in their service to the poor. As Superior General, I want to do all that I can to support the young men in formation and even the young missionaries, especially those between one and 15 years of profession or ordination, and to help them deepen their own sense of identity, their sense of belonging to the Congregation of the Mission.

In provinces that are developed and aging, many times young confreres find themselves alone, as was stated by one of the delegates at the General Assembly. He looks back and sees no one behind him in the formation programs and that creates a great sense of solitude. At times too, because personnel numbers are so low, confreres are dispersed in their works and sometimes overworked. This too can make a young confrere feel alone or unaccompanied. My first call is to the Visitors, along with the local superiors, to pay special attention

to young confreres, those newly missioned. Yet I want to do my part as well in that accompaniment.

Concretely, in a meeting that I had with two of the delegates, after my gathering with all the young delegates at the General Assembly, we came up with some ideas to help establish a networking relationship between the Superior General and the young confreres of the Congregation of the Mission.

- 1) We discussed setting up a multi-language website. This website will be created in the Province of Fortaleza. Its contents will focus on ongoing formation: human and psychological formation, vocational promotion, pictures, missions, etc. The website then will be linked to the official website of the Vincentian Family.
- 2) We talked about periodic circulars from the Superior General that would seek to animate, congratulate, inform and support young missionary confreres.
- 3) The following is a proposal for the network of “articulators,” who will later be confirmed with the approval of their Visitors. First there will be the general “articulator,” then five “articulators”: USA, Latin America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and then regional “articulators.” In each region throughout the world, a young missionary would be a representative of his region and would be in contact with a general “articulator,” who, in turn, would have regular, direct contact with the Superior General. I will be making contact with the Visitors of the confreres that we have considered as possible “articulators” of their region.
- 4) Another point that we talked about in the meeting was to publish, in *Nuntia*, a report of the international gathering, held during the Assembly, with the young missionaries. Fr. Alfredo Becerra has already gathered the material to be published at a later date.
- 5) We discussed initiating provincial or regional meetings. We hope too that we would be able to have an international gathering at some point in time.
- 6) One of the final points that we spoke of in the initial meeting was to limit the age of “young” missionaries to 1-15 years of profession for brothers and 1-15 years of ordination for priests.

Hopefully the networking of younger missionaries can contribute to a deepening of their belonging to the Congregation of the Mission.

II. Initial and ongoing formation

The Final Document of the General Assembly is very clear about the importance of offering formation according to the model of Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor. We can deepen the knowledge of our identity as Vincentians through study, through provincial, interprovincial and even international meetings, and through animating confreres to participate in spiritual exercises and retreats (cf. GA 2004 Final Document, III, 1). Each of the Visitors' Conferences at the General Assembly presented specific, concrete measures for coming to a greater knowledge of our identity through ongoing formation, in addition to initial formation.

As Superior General, I want to encourage all Visitors to continue to promote, among the members of their provinces, participation in our CIF program. I give the program my full support as a real, concrete way to flesh out who we are as Vincentians in the world today, as I said clearly in our General Assembly during the dialogue session with the Superior General and the new Council.

In addition to the CIF program we also have the opportunity to deepen the knowledge of our own identity as Vincentians, in a personal way, through Vincentian writings, those that are published in *Vincentiana* and elsewhere, and through the investigations and projects that are developed and promoted by **SIEV** (International Secretariat of Vincentian Studies), which exists to animate, inform and promote everything regarding Vincentian studies. It is in contact with the provincial and interprovincial organisms of the Congregation of the Mission and with the entire Vincentian Family.

SIEV is looking into the possibility of helping us come to a better knowledge of the Constitutions, as is hoped for in a number of places in the Final Document of the General Assembly.

On the level of Visitors' Conferences, there are any number of possibilities for ongoing formation that the Conferences or provinces can offer for further education in the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul. There is no excuse not to have a better understanding of our Vincentian charism today because of the many opportunities that are presented from ground level all the way up to and including the General Curia. I encourage Visitors to take advantage of these opportunities so that we might be strengthened in our Vincentian identity today.

III. The Vincentian Family Website; the CM Section (www.famvin.org/cm)

As you saw in the report from the most recent *tempo forte*, our decision was to continue encouraging Visitors, as well as the different Visitors' Conferences, to send information to the websites, whether in English, Spanish or French. We, as a Council, have made a recommitment to promoting the website. I personally see it as a way of being able to tell our story, to get it out there, and to let people read about it. It can inspire, encourage, animate and even be a way of attracting vocations to help us continue this great heritage that we have received from St. Vincent de Paul. Take a look at the website and see all the new and exciting things that are happening in the Congregation and in the Family. There are many ways that can inspire us to be more committed to our call to be evangelizers of the poor. I repeat: let us get out there and tell the story, acknowledging that the grace of what we do comes from God who has made possible this little Company. Lately, especially in 2004, the persons responsible for the website have made a great effort in developing the Congregation of the Mission section within the general Vincentian Family website. Now I think that it is important and necessary that these efforts be continued with the collaboration of all the provinces. So I invite all Visitors to send information from the provinces, especially that which has to do with the Congregation of the Mission.

IV. Program for teaching English in China

I am speaking primarily to the Visitors of English-speaking provinces. I encourage you to contemplate participating in this unique, "hidden" way of coming to understand our identity. If you want to know more, look at the different issues of the bulletin from the province, *China Sparks*, which contains a number of testimonies as to how our identity is more clearly understood in and through the English program. **Applications for September 2005 must be made by March 2005; contact Thomas Sendlein, CM: VTPTeach@aol.com, under subject type: Teach and, in the e-mail please identify yourself.**

V. Passing on who we are

Hopefully we can continue to develop a willingness to share what we know of who we are and pass it on to others, other members of the Vincentian Family, members of the different institutions where we labor. Passing on our identity, not only helps to enrich others, it also helps us come to an even clearer sense of who we are. I would like to put special emphasis on passing that identity on to the younger members of the Vincentian Family. I am speaking

specifically of the Vincentian Marian Youth movement. We do that in a very specific way through the role of moderators. But all the members of the Congregation in general are encouraged to accompany young people, whether it be in our own formation programs or among young missionaries or young members of the different branches of the Vincentian Family. In sharing it, we strengthen it.

Conclusion

There are many other ways that we can deepen our identity as members of the Congregation of the Mission. Certainly the best way of all is to get out there and walk with the poor and let them evangelize us, for the poor reflect back to us who we are. Once again I encourage each Visitor to send this circular to the members of his province. I, as always, will be happy to receive any comments, opinions, positive criticisms, and, of course, ideas about other ways that we can deepen our identity.

I conclude with a quote from the Final Document of the General Assembly:

Congregation of the Mission, be who you are! Do not yield to mediocrity! Fan into a flame the fire within! Like St. Vincent, walk passionately in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the poor. Give new life to your charism, the gift that the Holy Spirit has entrusted to you. Work tirelessly to go beyond the boundaries of your mission! Full of conviction, give witness to and spread the vitality of your vocation!

May Mary, the best disciple of Jesus Christ, continue to walk with us and help us to identify ourselves more deeply with her Son, Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General